



Nature tourism packages for MICE development: a comparative study of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: to analyze and compare the characteristics of nature-based tourism packages in Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit, North Sumatra, in supporting meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions (MICE) activities in Medan.

Method: this study uses a qualitative descriptive-comparative method. Data were collected through document analysis of tourism packages from online platforms and related literature, and analyzed using content analysis based on key indicators, including attraction, accessibility, amenities, itinerary structure, and MICE suitability.

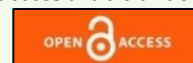
Findings: Bukit Lawang offers strong nature-based attractions and immersive ecotourism experiences, but is less suitable for MICE due to longer duration, lower flexibility, and limited accessibility. In contrast, Sibolangit is more suitable for MICE activities because of its proximity to Medan, shorter tour duration, and greater flexibility, though it offers a more limited selection of attractions and limited package development.

Implications: integrating Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit into a bundled tourism package could enhance the development of MICE-supporting tourism in North Sumatra. Such integration has the potential to improve visitor experience, extend the length of stay, and increase economic benefits for local communities.

Originality: lies in its comparative analysis of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit as integrated nature-based tourism destinations for supporting MICE activities in Medan.



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Introduction

Tourism has become a strategic sector, contributing to regional economic growth, job creation, and improved community welfare (Buhalis et al., 2023). In Indonesia, this sector serves not only as a recreational activity but also as a development instrument capable of driving various supporting economic sectors, such as

transportation, accommodation, culinary, and community micro-enterprises (Miftaloka et al., 2026). The success of a tourist destination is greatly influenced by the availability of tourist attractions, supporting facilities (amenities), and accessibility, known as the 3A concept in tourism destination development (Ilhamalimy et al., 2025). These three components are a crucial foundation for creating a quality tourism experience and promoting the long-term sustainability of the destination (Santos et al., 2022).

One of North Sumatra's leading natural tourism destinations is Bukit Lawang, a conservation area for orangutans and the gateway to Gunung Leuser National Park. Tourism in this area has had a significant economic impact on the local community through the growth of lodging, restaurants, tour guide services, and various other supporting businesses (Suprpto, 2025). On the other hand, the Sibolangit area also has significant natural tourism potential, including tropical forests, adventure tourism, and its strategic location as a connecting route between Medan and the Berastagi highlands (Irsyad & Prayogi, 2024). Both destinations have different natural resource characteristics, but have the potential to be developed as complementary natural tourism products.

Despite its significant potential, the development of nature tourism in Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit continues to face various challenges. Unbalanced growth in tourism activities without integrated management can lead to environmental problems, unfair business competition, and a decline in the quality of the tourist experience. Molyneaux (2022); Purwoko et al. (2022) found that limited infrastructure and weak coordination between stakeholders are major obstacles to managing conservation tourism in Bukit Lawang. Furthermore, service quality and destination image have also been shown to influence tourist satisfaction levels (Chan et al., 2022). Another issue was identified in the packaging of tour packages, where there was a mismatch between the offered itinerary and its implementation on the ground, affecting visitor perceptions and satisfaction (Sitorus et al., 2025). These conditions demonstrate that destination development requires not only strong tourist attractions but also professional, market-oriented management of tourism products.

At the same time, the meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) industry in Medan is experiencing significant developments that are increasingly important for regional economic growth. MICE activities generate broad multiplier effects on the hospitality, transportation, culinary, and other service sectors (Maulana et al., 2025). Global trends indicate that MICE tourists tend to spend more than regular leisure tourists and require additional tourism experiences before and after the main event (Ciuffreda & Simonetti, 2024). This condition opens up opportunities to develop nature tourism packages as supporting products for MICE activities in Medan. Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit are relatively close geographically to Medan, making them potential companion destinations (pre-tour and post-tour) for MICE participants.

Various previous studies have examined Bukit Lawang from the perspectives of conservation, destination management, community economic impact, and tourist satisfaction (Liyushiana et al., 2023; Molyneaux, 2022; Purwoko et al., 2022; Ridho et al., 2024; Sitorus et al., 2025). Meanwhile, research on MICE in Medan has focused more on aspects of event organization, service quality, and the economic impact of the MICE sector. However, to date, there is still very limited research that integrates natural tourism potential with the needs of the MICE industry through the development of structured tour packages. Furthermore, there are still very few studies comparing the characteristics and feasibility of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit as MICE destinations. Thus, there is a research gap in the absence of a comparative study specifically analyzing

the potential of both destinations in developing MICE-based nature tourism packages. The novelty of this research lies in integrating the perspective of nature tourism development with the MICE industry through a comparative analysis of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit. This study not only evaluates the natural tourism attractions of each destination but also assesses the destinations' suitability to support the needs of MICE tourists through aspects of attractions, accessibility, amenities, and the potential for package packaging. This approach provides a new perspective on the development of nature tourism destinations within a sustainable MICE industry value chain.

The purpose of this study is to analyze and compare the potential of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit in developing nature tourism packages to support MICE activities in Medan. Specifically, this study aims to identify the advantages and limitations of each destination, evaluate the suitability of their tourism components, and formulate alternatives for developing nature tourism packages that can be integrated with MICE activities. This research is important because the development of MICE-based nature tourism packages has the potential to more evenly expand tourism's economic benefits, increase tourist length of stay, strengthen destination competitiveness, and encourage synergy between the nature tourism sector and the MICE industry. In addition to providing practical contributions to local governments, the tourism industry, and MICE organizers in designing more competitive tourism products, this research is also expected to make academic contributions by enriching studies on the integration of nature tourism and MICE as an approach to sustainable tourism development in Indonesia.

Method

This study uses a qualitative, descriptive-comparative design to analyze and compare nature tourism packages offered in Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit, North Sumatra. The qualitative approach was chosen because the study focuses on an in-depth understanding of the content, structure, and characteristics of the tourism packages as tourism products offered to tourists. Meanwhile, the descriptive approach is used to describe the components of the tour packages, while the comparative approach aims to identify their similarities, differences, advantages, and limitations at both destinations to support meetings, incentives, conventions, and exhibitions (MICE) activities. This study does not involve field data collection through interviews or direct observation; rather, it focuses on the analysis of publicly available documents.

The research object is the nature tourism packages offered in the Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit areas. Tour packages were chosen as the research object because they represent tangible tourism products directly marketed to tourists. Through tour packages, it is possible to understand how a destination is packaged, promoted, and structured to meet the needs of the tourism market. In the context of this research, a tour package is viewed as a product comprising integrated components, such as travel itineraries, tourist activities, supporting facilities, trip duration, and visit flow. Analysis of these components enables researchers to evaluate the suitability of tour packages for MICE tourists, who generally require efficient, structured, and experiential travel.

The data used in this study consists of primary and secondary data. Primary data consists of tour package documents obtained from travel service provider websites, online tour package sales platforms, and publicly available promotional brochures. These documents contain information on travel itineraries, offered tourist activities, facilities provided, activity duration, and various other supporting information related to the tourism product. Meanwhile, secondary data was obtained from scientific

journals, reference books, research reports, and various publications relevant to the development of tourist destinations, tour packages, and the MICE industry. Secondary data was used to strengthen the theoretical foundation and support the interpretation of the research results.

Data collection was conducted through documentation studies. This technique was chosen because it aligns with the research objectives, which focus on analyzing documented tourism products. The data collection process began with a search for online tour package documents, followed by a selection process based on their relevance to the research objectives. The selected documents were tour packages that clearly stated information about tourism activities, facilities offered, trip duration, and itinerary. Furthermore, the collected documents were grouped by destination location, namely Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit, to facilitate analysis and comparison.

Data analysis was conducted using content analysis and comparative analysis. The initial stage of the analysis involved data reduction by selecting relevant information from each tour package document. The selected information was then categorized according to the research's focus areas: tourist attractions, supporting facilities (amenities), accessibility, itinerary structure, and the suitability of the tour package to the needs of MICE activities. The categorized data were then presented in a comparison matrix to facilitate the identification of the characteristics of each tour package. The comparative analysis was conducted by comparing the two destinations using these indicators to identify their respective strengths and weaknesses. The results of the comparison were then interpreted to assess the potential of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit as natural MICE tourism destinations in Medan.

The validity of the data in this study was maintained through source triangulation and diligent document review. Source triangulation was conducted by comparing tour package information obtained from various media, such as tour provider websites, tour package sales platforms, and promotional brochures, ensuring that the information used was not solely reliant on a single source. Furthermore, diligent observation was conducted by systematically and repeatedly reviewing documents to ensure consistent interpretation of each component of the analyzed tour package. Through these steps, the data are expected to be credible and to support the research results objectively and academically.

Results and discussion

This study analyzes nature tourism packages offered at two North Sumatran tourist destinations, Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit. Data were obtained from tour package documents available through travel provider websites, tour package sales platforms, and online itineraries. The analysis focused on tour package components, including tourist attractions, trip duration, activity level, accessibility, activity variety, itinerary structure, and their suitability for MICE activities. The identification results indicate that Bukit Lawang tour packages are dominated by trekking, tropical forest exploration, wildlife observation, and adventure-based activities with relatively long trip durations. In contrast, Sibolangit tour packages are dominated by nature-based recreation activities, such as off-roading, river tours, and other outdoor activities, with shorter trip durations.

Based on the analysis of tour package documents, several characteristic differences were identified between the Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit tour packages. A comparison of the analysis results is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 shows the results of comparing tour packages to support MICE activities

Nu.	Indicator	Bukit Lawang	Sibolangit
1.	Tourist attractions	Strong (trekking, forest, wildlife)	Moderate (offroad, river)
2.	Package duration	2-5 days (tends to be long)	1 day (short)
3.	Activity level	High (physical, trekking)	Low-moderate (relaxed)
4.	Accessibility	Relatively far from the terrain	Close to Medan
5.	Activity variety	Limited (nature-focused)	Limited (recreational focus)
6.	Suitability	Low	Medium-high
7.	Itinerary structure	Less efficient	Simple but not yet detailed
8.	Development level	More developed	Still limited

Source: secondary data, processed

Based on the comparison results in Table 1, Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit have distinct characteristics as tourist destinations. Bukit Lawang excels in terms of tourist appeal, offering a strong ecotourism experience through trekking in tropical forests, wildlife observation, and interaction with the pristine natural environment. Meanwhile, Sibolangit offers attractions more oriented toward nature recreation, such as off-road activities and river tours. While attractive, Sibolangit's attractions are not as unique and compelling as Bukit Lawang's. In terms of duration and activity level, Bukit Lawang generally offers two- to five-day tour packages with fairly intensive activities that require a good level of physical fitness. The trekking activity, the main attraction, requires tourists to allocate more time to enjoy the experience fully. Conversely, Sibolangit offers more one-day tour packages with relatively relaxed and less strenuous activities. This makes Sibolangit more suitable for travelers with limited time or those looking for a shorter trip.

Another difference is seen in accessibility and suitability for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) activities. Sibolangit's proximity to Medan offers shorter travel times and easier access for both tourists and corporate groups. This makes Sibolangit more suitable for MICE activities, such as gatherings, outbound activities, and team building. Conversely, Bukit Lawang is less suitable for these activities due to its relatively long distance and its focus on adventure tourism and nature conservation. Although both destinations still offer a limited range of tourism activities, their development conditions differ clearly. Bukit Lawang has developed into a more mature tourist destination with relatively better facilities and management. However, the itinerary remains less efficient due to the long travel time and trekking-focused activities.

On the other hand, Sibolangit has a simpler and more easily implemented itinerary, but still requires more detailed development to make the tourism experience more structured and engaging. Overall, Bukit Lawang excels as an ecotourism destination, offering immersive, unique natural experiences, while Sibolangit offers advantages in accessibility, flexible visit times, and potential for development as a MICE destination. Therefore, the choice of destination can be tailored to the traveler's goals, whether prioritizing adventure and nature conservation or seeking a more practical, accessible destination suitable for group or corporate activities.

The results of a comparative analysis of the suitability of tour packages in Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit with MICE criteria are shown in Table 2. The assessment was conducted using five indicators: time efficiency, comfort, group activities, flexibility, and tourist attractions. The comparison provides an overview of the strengths and limitations of each destination in supporting MICE-based tourism development.

Table 2 shows the results of the suitability of tour packages with MICE criteria

Nu.	MICE Indicator	Bukit lawang	Sibolangit
1.	Time efficiency	Not suitable	Suitable
2.	Convenience	Low	High
3.	Group activities	Limited	Potential
4.	Flexibility	Low	High
5.	Attractiveness	High	Sufficient

Source: secondary data, processed

Based on Table 2, there are significant differences between Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit in the suitability of tour packages for MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) criteria. In general, Sibolangit is better suited than Bukit Lawang because it has characteristics that support the efficient implementation of group and corporate activities. Meanwhile, Bukit Lawang is more prominent in terms of natural attractions, but has several limitations in supporting MICE activities. In terms of time efficiency, Bukit Lawang is less suitable because it is far from Medan, requiring a fairly long travel time. Furthermore, most tourist activities in this area, such as trekking and nature exploration, require a longer duration to be optimally enjoyed. Conversely, Sibolangit has the advantage of being close to Medan, resulting in shorter travel times and activities that can be completed in a day. This condition greatly supports the implementation of MICE activities, which generally have a structured and limited schedule.

In terms of comfort, Sibolangit received a higher rating than Bukit Lawang. Ease of access, short travel times, and less strenuous activities ensured participants felt more comfortable throughout the event. Conversely, trekking and the terrain at Bukit Lawang required greater physical preparation, resulting in a lower level of comfort, especially for participants of varying ages and physical conditions. In terms of group activities, Sibolangit also demonstrated greater potential. The area's supportive environment for outdoor activities, such as outbound activities, gatherings, team games, and other recreational activities, makes this destination more adaptable to the needs of large groups and companies. Conversely, activities at Bukit Lawang tended to focus on individual or small-group nature exploration, leaving relatively little room for organized group activities.

The same differences are evident in the flexibility aspect as well. Sibolangit offers a high level of flexibility, as tourism activities can be tailored to various participant needs, from short events to full-day activities. The proximity and simpler activity options make it easier for organizers to schedule. In contrast, Bukit Lawang offers less flexibility because most activities require significant time and depend on natural conditions and participants' physical readiness. Nevertheless, in terms of attractiveness, Bukit Lawang has an advantage over Sibolangit. The beauty of the tropical forest, the presence of wildlife, and authentic trekking experiences provide significant added value as a natural tourism destination. These attractions can create memorable experiences for tourists.

Meanwhile, Sibolangit's attractiveness is considered quite good, but its recreational activities are still relatively common and lack the uniqueness of Bukit Lawang. The comparison results indicate that Sibolangit is more suitable for developing MICE-based tourism packages because it excels in time efficiency, comfort, group activities, and flexibility. Meanwhile, Bukit Lawang excels as a tourist attraction but does not support the primary needs of MICE activities, which require easy access, efficient time management, and structured group activities. Therefore, Sibolangit has greater

potential to develop into a MICE tourism destination, while Bukit Lawang is better positioned as an ecotourism and adventure tourism destination.



Figure 1 word cloud results
Source: secondary data, processed

Figure 1 is a word cloud depicting the main concepts in the research on the development of MICE-based nature tourism packages in Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit. This word cloud contains keywords related to the research theme, with each word's size indicating its level of dominance or importance in the study. In general, the most dominant words in the image are "tourism package," "nature tourism," and "mice." This indicates that the research focuses on developing nature-based tourism products tailored to the needs of the MICE (meetings, incentives, conferences, and exhibitions) industry. These three concepts are at the core of the analysis because they illustrate the relationship between tourism products, types of natural destinations, and business tourism market segmentation.

Furthermore, the words representing the research objects are also visible, namely "Bukit Lawang" and "Sibolangit." These two destinations serve as the center of comparison in the research to see how their respective characteristics can support the development of MICE-based tourism packages. Furthermore, the word "medan" underscores the city's role as a MICE center and a primary market for business travelers, as reflected in the development of tourism packages. Furthermore, this word cloud also contains various supporting concepts in tourism destination development, such as "accessibility," "flexibility," "time efficiency," "duration," and "itinerary." These words highlight key indicators for evaluating tourism packages, particularly in the context of MICE, which demands efficiency, regular schedules, and ease of access. This demonstrates that the quality of a tourism package is determined not only by its attractiveness but also by operational aspects and travel management.

Finally, there are terms related to tourism activities and experiences, such as "team building," "tourism activities," "tourism experiences," and "event management."

This confirms that the tourism packages studied are not solely oriented toward recreation but also support group and corporate activities, which are often part of MICE programs. Overall, this image represents the interconnectedness of natural tourism destinations, tourism package packaging, and the needs of the MICE industry within a unified, integrated tourism development concept.

Discussion

The differences in the characteristics of tour packages between Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit reflect the heterogeneity of destination evolution patterns within the regional tourism system. From the 3A perspective (attraction, amenities, accessibility), the imbalance among these elements not only reflects variations in destination quality but also reveals differences in development orientation, which tend to be sectoral (Geng et al., 2025). Sampieri & Bagader (2024) emphasize that the harmonization of these three elements largely determines destination sustainability. However, in practice, many destinations develop partially, resulting in fragmented tourism products (Romão et al., 2023). This condition leads to differences in the level of destination readiness to respond to specific market segments, such as MICE, which require integration among experience, efficiency, and measurable travel structures.

In the context of MICE tourism, the dynamics of tourism demand are no longer based solely on recreational motivations, but on a combination of professional goals and the need for additional, controlled experiences (Azizi et al., 2026). This places MICE tourism in the category of high-demand, structured tourism, where travel decisions are heavily influenced by factors such as time efficiency, service reliability, and the minimization of travel uncertainty (Zhang & Tian, 2025). Therefore, destinations that cannot provide a clear travel structure will experience limited MICE market penetration, despite their high tourist appeal. This phenomenon strengthens the argument of Ciuffreda & Simonetti (2024) that MICE not only creates a direct economic impact but also forms a new demand ecosystem for tourism destinations that can function as extensions of business events.

When examined through Pine & Gilmore's (1998) experience economy lens, Bukit Lawang represents a stage of immersive experience, where tourists become not merely observers but also active participants in the natural experience. However, in the context of MICE, this high level of immersion becomes a barrier when not balanced with flexibility in time and control over activities (An et al., 2025). This demonstrates the paradox between experiential richness and operational efficiency. Suprpto's (2025) study confirms that Bukit Lawang's economic value is strongly supported by direct experience-based activities, but does not explicitly address the transformation of tourism product structure for the business segment. Meanwhile, Kaewsaengorn et al. (2026) show that limited governance and infrastructure hinder destinations' ability to adapt to the needs of more segmented markets, including MICE tourism.

Conversely, Sibolangit can be positioned within a time-efficient tourism system, where the primary value of a destination lies not in the depth of experience but in the speed of access and ease of integration into a broader travel itinerary. However, further analysis shows that this structural efficiency has not been offset by stronger experience value creation, so Sibolangit remains in the transitional destination stage. From the perspective of destination lifecycle theory, this condition indicates that Sibolangit is in the development phase, requiring interventions such as product enrichment and service standardization to advance to the consolidation stage as a competitive MICE destination.

From a tourism product architecture perspective, the fundamental difference between the two destinations lies in the imbalance between experiential depth and structural flexibility. Bukit Lawang has a high experiential density but low flexibility, while Sibolangit has high flexibility but limited experiential density. This imbalance indicates that neither destination has yet achieved optimal product configuration, namely a condition in which elements of experience, time, and service are harmoniously integrated to meet market needs. In this context, Chan et al. (2022); Rahman et al. (2023); Wang (2025); emphasize that consistency between destination image and actual service quality is a key factor in shaping tourists' perceived value, which, in this case, has not yet been fully achieved in either destination.

When analyzed using the destination competitiveness framework (Crouch, 2011), the main weakness lies not in resource endowment, but in the destination management system. Bukit Lawang has a comparative advantage in natural resources, while Sibolangit has advantages in accessibility factors. However, the absence of integrated destination management prevents both destinations from transforming into competitive tourism clusters to support MICE in Medan. This indicates that the main problem is institutional and structural, not solely related to the tourism product. In the context of regional tourism development, the failure of integration among destinations demonstrates the ineffectiveness of the concept of a spatially integrated tourism system (Kaya & Karakuş, 2026; Xu et al., 2024; Zhu et al., 2024). The tourism development literature emphasizes that increases in length of stay and tourist expenditure are highly dependent on a destination's ability to establish a connected travel circuit (Park & Zhong, 2022). Medan, as a core MICE hub, has significant potential as a driver. However, without strong connectivity with surrounding destinations, the multiplier effect of MICE activities remains localized and does not spread optimally to peripheral areas.

Furthermore, this study's results reinforce the importance of tourism product bundling as a market-based destination development strategy. This concept not only combines multiple destinations into a single travel package but also requires a synchronized itinerary that considers time, distance, activity intensity, and tourist profiles. Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit have a complementary relationship, where both can form a dual-layer tourism experience: the first layer is experiential immersion, and the second is functional relaxation. However, without a systematic integrative design, this potential synergy remains latent and does not translate into actual economic value. Thus, this discussion leads to the conceptual conclusion that the main problem in developing nature-based MICE tourism lies not in the limited number of destinations, but rather in the lack of a tourism product integration system capable of bridging the differences in destination characteristics. This underscores the urgency of an ecosystem-based tourism development approach, where destinations are no longer viewed as individual entities but as part of a network of interdependent tourism systems. This approach is crucial in strengthening North Sumatra's position as a competitive nature-based MICE destination at the national and regional levels.

Conclusions

This study found significant differences in the characteristics of Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit tour packages, supporting the development of MICE-based tourism in Medan. Bukit Lawang has a main advantage in ecotourism-based attractions that offer immersive experiences, but it has limitations in terms of time efficiency, flexibility, and suitability for MICE tourists. In contrast, Sibolangit offers advantages in accessibility, short travel time, and flexible activities that align better with the characteristics of MICE

tourism. However, it is still limited in developing variations in activities and in tourism product packaging. Overall, both destinations do not fully meet the ideal criteria for MICE tour packages, but have complementary characteristics.

The implications of these findings indicate that the development of nature tourism in North Sumatra cannot be done in isolation but requires an integrative approach across destinations, particularly to support the MICE industry in Medan. Integration between Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit through the concept of tourism product bundling has the potential to enhance the value of the tourism experience and the efficiency of business travelers' travel, thereby extending the length of stay and increasing tourism expenditure. However, this study has limitations because it uses only an analytical approach for tour package documents, without supporting primary data from interviews with destination managers, MICE industry players, and tourists. Therefore, interpretation is still limited to documented product aspects.

Further research is recommended to employ a mixed-methods approach, combining document analysis, in-depth interviews, and field observations to obtain a more comprehensive picture of the implementation of tourism packages in the field. Furthermore, further research is needed to empirically test the MICE-based tourism package integration model, including measuring MICE tourists' preferences for combinations of natural destinations such as Bukit Lawang and Sibolangit. Future studies can also expand the scope by comparing other destinations in North Sumatra or other regions in Indonesia to develop a more applicable and sustainable MICE-based nature tourism destination development model.

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